DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 471 536 JC 030 049

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| AUTHOR | Secolsky, Charles |
| TITLE | The Influence of the Complexity of Student Educational Goals on Student Performance at Community College. |
| PUB DATE | 2002-06-00 |
| NOTE | 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual International Forum of the Association for Institutional Research (42nd, Toronto, Canada, June 2-5, 2002). |
| PUB TYPE | Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150) |
| EDRS PRICE | EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS |
| DESCRIPTORS | Community Colleges; *Educational Attainment; *Educational Objectives; Goal Orientation; *Outcomes of Education; Student Attitudes; *Student Educational Objectives; *Two Year College Students; Two Year Colleges |

ABSTRACT

It is a commonly held belief that student educational achievement is enhanced when students have goals. But individual goals may vary in terms of difficulty, as well as in terms of their importance and the commitment students make to achieve them. In this study, goal complexity was viewed as the influence of commitment, difficulty, and importance in explaining variation for several goals and subsequent performance for two groups of first-time community college students: Composition I students and freshman Basic English Skills students. Regression analyses were performed on ratings of a number of different goals and their corresponding task performances to see if the set of three variables could explain each goal and its related performance. The goals considered were whether a student planned to stay at the community college, grade point average for the fall of 2001, ultimate educational aspiration, occupational desire, and others. Of 950 registered students who received questionnaires, 114 composition students and 74 skills students returned initial and follow-up questionnaires. Twenty-two percent of Composition and 45 percent of Skills students listed attainment of a B.A. degree as their educational goal. The author concluded that students who have a goal may achieve greater success at a community college, but more effort is needed to combine the results of the analyses so the complex of predictor variables can better explain goals and task performance. (Author/NB)

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# The Influence of the Complexity of Student Educational Goals on Student Performance at Community College

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**Paper presented at the 42nd Annual Conference of the Association of Institutional Research, June 2-5, 2002, Toronto, Canada**

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# The Influence of the Complexity of Student Educational Goals on Student Performance at Community College

## Abstract

It is a commonly held belief that student educational achievement in college is enhanced if students have goals. Goals tend to help students and other goal setters achieve success. But, goals can vary in many ways, which in turn can influence student performance. Not only can each type of goal vary in terms of difficulty, but goals can vary in terms of their importance and in terms of the commitment students make to achieve these higher education goals.

In this study, goal complexity was viewed as the influence of commitment, difficulty and importance in explaining variation for several goals and subsequent performance for two groups of first-time community college students: freshman Composition I students and freshman Basic English Skills students. Regression analyses were performed on ratings of a number of different goals and their corresponding task performances to see if the set of three variables could explain each goal and its related performance. The goals were whether the student planned to stay at the community college, grade-point average for the fall 2001 semester, ultimate educational goal, occupational goal and others. An attempt was made to explain goals and task performance using the three predictor variables: commitment, difficulty and importance. The tasks were actual grade-point average, fall to spring retention and credits completed. Goal change was also measured. Commitment scores differed by major with undeclared majors having lower commitment scores.

Significant results were obtained, but the small R-square values necessitated that other variables be added to the models. At best the set of predictors represents a small overall contribution to the explanation of actual gpa. The addition of credits completed as a predictor increased the R square to over .31 for the 503 first-time freshman Composition I students and to over .39 for the 447 first-time Skills students. More effort is needed to combine the results of these analyses so that the complex of predictor variables can better explain goals and task performance. The obtained small R square values may be related to the fact that students were faced with a situation in which they had to pick a goal without having had the time to give it much thought. Especially for the educational goal of attending the community college, many first semester students may not have had a solid basis for choosing their goal.

# The Influence of the Complexity of Student Educational Goals on Student Performance at Community College

It is a commonly held belief that student educational achievement in college is enhanced if students have goals (see, for example, Gordon, 1987). Goals tend to help students and other goal setters achieve success (e.g., Klein, Wesson, Hollenbeck & Alge, 1999; Tubbs, 1986). Goals enable students to focus on academic work. Goals and the commitment to goals can vary in many ways, however, which in turn can influence student performance. This statement is probably more often true for community college students than for students at four year colleges.

Not only can each type of goal vary in terms of difficulty (Locke & Latham, 1990), but it can vary in terms of its importance to students and in the commitment students make to achieve them. If goals are important, they will more likely be achieved. If goals are more difficult, a greater degree of accomplishment may be realized. Also, if students are committed to goals, more is likely to be accomplished with respect to those goals.

In this study, it was assumed that goals are more long term as in completing a degree or completing one's stay at a college rather than the short term goals students may have in completing assignments. In fact, many students attempt to achieve the longer term goals through completion of the shorter term tasks. The present study borrowed from the psychological literature and dealt with the influence of goal commitment, goal difficulty and goal importance in being able to explain such moderate to longer term goals as grade point average for a semester, credits completed, semester to semester retention, and the tendency to stay at the same college or transfer to a four year college before graduation.

Goal commitment has been defined by Locke and Latham (1990) as one's determination to reach a goal. In fact, Donovan and Radosevich (1998) have stated that goal commitment is a moderator of the relationship between performance goals and task performance. The moderator nature of this variable implies that higher levels of goal commitment lead to a stronger relationship between performance goals and subsequent performance. In addition, Klein, Wesson, Hollenbeck and Alge (1999) state the basic finding of goal theory that "under certain conditions, specific, difficult goals can lead to higher performance relative to vague or easy goals" (p. 885).

Some have argued (e.g., Hollenbeck & Klein, 1987; Johnson & Perlow, 1990) that goal commitment is influenced by need for achievement. To qualify this statement for higher education, in order for goal commitment to be effective, the commitment must be longer term. However, as these long term goals are actualized in stages, there is a greater likelihood that goals might change, with the commitment towards the original ones also changing. As Stake (2002) has implied, educational phenomena (including goals) are transient. This thought generates a greater need to better understand the complexity of educational goals.

In higher education, and in particular community college, performance goals are operationalized as length of stay at the institution (e.g., transfer, graduation), highest degree planned, grade-point average, number of credits completed, and semester to semester retention. Actual performance takes on the same dimensions. However, only a small subset of these variables can be tracked and reported on within one or two semesters. Only grade-point average for a semester, retention, and credits completed can be tracked over a bit more than a semester's time to determine if the goal was reached. However, the goals having to do with highest degree planned and length of stay at the college can also be revisited in terms of whether students changed their goals after one semester. Goal change should be differentiated from the achievement of goals. Nonetheless, the longer term goals such as graduation can be evaluated at a later point in time. For each of these goals or change in goals, the commitment, perceived difficulty and importance of goals were operationalized by a short objective question (see questionnaire in Appendix I).

The purpose of this study was to document the complexity of goals for first-time community college students and to keep track of students' goals held one semester after the beginning of college for the fall 2001 first-time cohort of students. Students were asked about commitment, difficulty and importance for each goal. An effort was made to determine if these constructs were related to the goals, goal changes and to the performance on these goals.

**Method**

One thousand two hundred and two students of whom 950 were first-time freshmen completed a questionnaire on goals in their freshman English composition course or in their freshman Basic English skills course. Questionnaires were administered in class and were constructed to take only ten to fifteen minutes to complete. Only questionnaires of first-time students in fall 2001 were used in this study During the spring 2002 semester, this group of students was mailed a follow-up questionnaire to determine if initial fall goals had changed. Also, data were compiled on the actual grade point averages and credits completed after the fall semester. Then, during the spring 2002 semester, the number of credits of returning students was compiled. There were 503 first semester Composition I students and 447 first semester Basic Skills students used in this study.

The questionnaire consisted of a series of questions that pertained to goals on transfer, graduating, grade-point average, highest degree planned, occupational goal and other information including the semester in attendance. For each goal, students were also asked objective questions about goal commitment, perceived goal difficulty and goal importance. Data on demographic variables such as age and major were also collected. On the initial questionnaire students were asked to indicate their names so that data could be matched to the system-wide data collected and to the follow-up questionnaires. Commitment was constructed as a 4-point scale from 1 (Very Committed) to 4 (Not Committed at All). Difficulty was a 3 point scale as Easy, Medium and Difficult. Importance was on a 4 point scale from 1 (Very Important) to 4 (Not Important at All).

**Analysis I (Educational Goal at Community Collége)**

A variety of procedures was used to carry out the various analyses performed in the study. For each goal or for the performance for each goal (such as actual gpa, retention and credits completed), multiple regression analysis or logistic regression was used with goal commitment, perceived goal difficulty and goal importance as independent variables to determine their contribution in explaining each dependent measure.

The first goal studied was measured on an eight point scale. It is a measure of what are the students' goals for continuing at community college, in this case the County College of Morris in Randolph, New Jersey. On the questionnaire the goals went from "no goal at all" to "graduating from the community college." Since transfer to a four year college after one year is considered more difficult than graduating from a community college, it was recoded as the highest level of this goal sequence. The next to highest level was "transferring to a four year school before graduating." Graduating with a two-year Associate's degree was placed below these two categories (was given a lower value). Those who chose "Learn skills to get a job" were not included in the analyses because this value was not on the same scale as the other values. Multiple regression analysis was performed on the goal sequence using the three independent variables: goal commitment, perceived goal difficulty and goal importance. The results of the regression were as follows for 503 first-time English Composition I students.

Y'(goal) =7.52 - .16 commitment + .25 difficulty - .24 importance.. Rsquare=.0252

Recognizing that "importance" was not in the model theoretically, and had a significance of .14, the regression was rerun leaving "importance" out of the equation. For the two remaining independent variables, "commitment" and "difficulty," the more parsimonious regression equation became

Y'(goal) = 7.67 - .30 commitment +.26 difficulty. Rsquare=.0208

The significance of the associated absolute value of t for "commitment"was .03 and for difficulty it was .02. In that the scale for "commitment" was reversed, the greater the commitment, the higher the level of this goal. For the Skills students, the same result was not obtained; however, goal commitment was significant. The resultant equation was

Y'(goal) = 7.61 - .37 commitment +.05 difficulty. Rsquare=.0142

In both courses the students studied were only first-timers. The distribution of students and their goals is presented below. For this goal, it was not possible as yet to determine if students had met their goals; it could only be determined if goals were related to goal commitment and goal difficulty.

| Educational Goal Levels | Comp. I | | Skills | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | n | % | n | % |
| No goal at all | 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Hope to last here beyond the midterm | 2 | 0 | 8 | 2 |
| Complete fall 2001 semester | 22 | 4 | 31 | 7 |
| Learn skills to get a job | 7 | 1 | 20 | 4 |
| Complete 2002 semester | 21 | 4 | 11 | 2 |
| Complete Certificate Program | 5 | 1 | 9 | 2 |
| Graduate with two-year Associate's Degree | 178 | 35 | 171 | 38 |
| Transfer to 4-year college before graduating | 111 | 22 | 93 | 21 |
| Transfer to 4-year college after one year | 154 | 31 | 104 | 23 |

**Analysis II (gpa-goal)**

For the second goal, students were asked to respond about their gpa for the fall term. Once again the question was whether goal commitment, goal difficulty and goal importance could explain variation in the goal for grade-point average. For this goal, the actual gpa was obtained and compared to the goal for gpa. The regression equation for gpa-goal as the dependent variable for first-time English Composition I students was:

Y(gpa-goal) = 3.36 - .129 commitment +.056 difficulty - .108 importance. Rsquare=.0856

When all the interaction terms for these three variables were entered into the equation, Rsquare became .1150.

Regression weights for "commitment" and "importance" were significant at ($p<.05$) without the interaction terms. However, the interaction between commitment and importance and the interaction of all three variables were significant at $p<.05$.

From these results, one can conclude that as "commitment" and "importance" of the goal increase, the expected gpa-goal can be better explained. The actual gpa earned was also subjected to regression analysis to determine if "commitment," "perceived goal difficulty" and "importance" can explain actual gpa. Once again, "commitment" was a significant predictor ($p=.0036$; Rsquare=.0309) for first-time English Composition I students, implying that higher levels of "commitment" were associated with higher actual gpas. None of the regressors had significant coefficients for the Basic Skills group when regressing the three explanatory variables on actual gpa. However, although the gpa-goals and the actual gpas were significantly correlated for the Comp. I group ($r=.27$; $p<.0001$), and although the simple r's for "commitment"and gpa-goal and "commitment" and actual gpa were significant, "commitment" did not significantly predict the difference between actual gpa and gpa-goal. This result can be attributed to the fact that the difference scores were too unreliable, created a regression toward the mean, and, in fact, did not represent a situation where higher levels of commitment were associated with higher difference scores. It is probably the case that the relationship between actual gpa and gpa-goal changes as a function of "commitment."

**Analysis III (Ultimate Educational Goal)**

English Composition I freshmen were asked what educational degree they expected as their ultimate educational goal. The distribution of responses was as follows. The distribution of Basic Skills students is also presented at the right.

| **Ultimate Educational Goal** | **Comp. I** | | **Skills** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **n** | **%** | **n** | **%** |
| Certificate | 12 | 2 | 25 | 6 |
| Associate's | 51 | 10 | 95 | 22 |
| Bachelor's | 257 | 52 | 199 | 45 |
| Master's | 107 | 22 | 68 | 16 |
| Doctorate | 29 | 6 | 27 | 6 |
| Law Degree | 21 | 4 | 13 | 3 |
| M.D. | 20 | 4 | 11 | 3 |

For both sets of students, the higher the difficulty of the goal, the higher the level of the goal. The regression equations were as follows:

Comp. I students Y'(ultimate educ. goal)=1.986-0.011 commitment+.631 difficulty
Rsquare=.0950

Skills students Y'(ultimate educ. goal)=1.587-0.092 commitment+0.710 difficulty
Rsquare=.0950

The above implies that as community college students' goals increase for their ultimate degree, their perceived difficulty of obtaining the degree gets greater. This was true for both types of students (Comp. I students and Basic Skills students). It also supports the statement by Klein et al. (1999) that specific, difficult goals can lead to higher levels of performance, or in this case, to higher potential accomplishment.

**Analysis IV (Occupational Goals)**

Students in both groups were asked about their occupational goal. The choices were mostly nominal in nature: (a) get a job in one's field of study after leaving the community college, (b) get a job in one's field of study after completion of a Bachelor's Degree or beyond, (c) maintain current employment while pursuing an education, or (d) take advantage of opportunities to advance in one's current job. Since the categories were not at least ordinal, multiple regression analysis was not performed. Instead, frequencies for the categories are presented. The frequencies are followed by chi-square analyses with each of the variables "commitment," "difficulty" and "importance." Frequencies and percentages are first presented for both English Comp I students and Basic Skills students.

| Occupational Goal | Comp. I n | % | Skills n | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| get a job after leaving community college | 73 | 15 | 103 | 24 |
| get a job in one's field of study after completion of Bachelor's Degree or beyond | 321 | 64 | 212 | 49 |
| maintain current employment while pursuing an education | 82 | 16 | 106 | 24 |
| take advantage of opportunities to advance in one's current job | 24 | 5 | 15 | 3 |

Clearly the dominant choice, especially for the Composition I group, was "get a job in one's field of study after completion of a Bachelor's Degree or beyond." Chi-square values bearing on the relationship of these occupational goals to "commitment," difficulty" and "importance" were all significant for the freshman Composition I group. For the Skills group, chi-square was only significant for the variables occupational goal and perceived "difficulty." "Commitment" and "importance" were both independent of occupational goal.

**Analysis V (Credits Completed)**

Credits completed for each student were obtained from the student database for all students who completed the first questionnaire. However, separate estimates of goal commitment, perceived goal difficulty and goal importance were not obtained. Therefore, the "commitment," "difficulty" and "importance" ratings obtained for the goal of grade-point average were used. A regression analysis captured the relationship between the three ratings and the actual credits completed for the fall 2001 semester.

The only variable that significantly contributed to explaining credits completed was the variable "importance." The regression equation using difficulty and importance was

Y'(credits completed)=4.70-.1225difficulty-1.832importance Rsquare=.0307

**Analysis VI (Fall to Spring Retention)**

Five hundred and three first-time students completed the first questionnaire while enrolled in freshman Composition I classes. Four hundred and thirty-seven registered for credits in the spring 2002 semester. Sixty-six students were no longer enrolled at the college. Three hundred and ninety-two students were first-time full-time students. Logistic regession analysis was run to determine which variables contributed to the dichotomous dependent variable of returning or not returning to college in the spring. The two variables that had a significant chi-square value were actual gpa ($p<.0001$) and "commitment" ($p=.0028$).

Four hundred and forty-seven first-time students completed the first questionnaire while enrolled in English Skills courses. Three hundred and sixty-four registered for credits in the spring 2002 semester. Eighty-four students were no longer enrolled at the college. Three hundred and five English skills students were first-time full-time students. Logistic regression analysis was run to determine which variables contributed to the dichotomous dependent variable of returning or not returning to the college in the spring. The two variables that had a significant chi-square value were actual gpa ($p<.0001$) and educational goal for attending the community college ($p=.0018$).

These results indicate that, as expected, the actual gpa is predictive of fall to spring retention. Also, "commitment" significantly contributed to explaining retention for first-time Composition I students'. The goal for attending the college was also predictive of retention for the Skills classes.

**Analysis VII (Commitment and Goal Change)**

During the spring 2002 semester, students who completed questionnaires at the beginning of the fall semester received a follow-up questionnaire. The first question on the follow-up questionnaire had to do with student goals. The question was almost identical to the question that appeared as the goal question on the first questionnaire. If the student's response on the second questionnaire was the same as his/her response on the first questionnaire, there was no goal change and these students were classified into Group 1. If a student's goal went down/decreased a level or more, he/she, was placed into Group 2. Otherwise, if a student's goal was at a higher level in the spring than in the previous fall, the student was placed into Group 3. This grouping was done for Composition I students and Skills students separately.

There were 114 Composition I students who returned the second questionnaire and 74 Skills students who completed the first questionnaire and also returned the second questionnaire. Analysis of variance was performed for the Comp. I group using "commitment" as the dependent variable. The ANOVA was significant ($F=3.45$; $p=.0352$). A Scheffe' multiple comparison procedure revealed a significant difference between groups 2 and 3 with Group 3 having a higher mean. For the Skills students, an analysis of variance was also significant ($F=6.45$; $p=.0027$). A Scheffe' multiple comparison procedure revealed that Group 1 had a higher mean than Group 3.

The above analyses at first seemed perplexing. Using "commitment" as the dependent variable for both groups, Group 3 has a logically higher mean commitment score with students raising standards than Group 2 where students lowered standards for the Composition I student subgroup. On the other hand, the Skills students' Group 1 had a higher commitment mean and had no change in goal in comparison to Group 3, which raised their goal. For Skills students, students seem to be having a higher commitment when not changing their goals than the commitment level of those who increased their goals.

**VIII (Commitment and Major)**

Major field of study was collected on the questionnaire and a determination was made to see if commitment values differed for each group of majors. As one would expect, students with an

undeclared major had significantly lower commitment scores than majors from the divisions of Health, Business and Technology, and Liberal Arts.

**Discussion**

With significant regression weights, the three variables of commitment, difficulty and importance demonstrated a small degree of influence on the goals and performance with respect to first semester student educational outcomes. The influence was small for freshman Composition I students, as evidenced by the small R square values in regression analyses for goal for attending community college. However, analyses with significant regression weights for predicting "gpa-goal" and "ultimate educational goal" had R squares that were a bit higher. Nonetheless, other sources of dependent variable explanation are needed in combination with the three variables and their interaction terms together defined as constituting goal complexity. Other factors are needed to boost the R square to considerably higher levels. One of the factors which when added to the equation increased R square considerably was "credits completed." For actual gpa, the R square increased to .3137 for freshman Composition I students and to .3917 for Skills students. Secolsky (1995) found "credits completed" as the most prominent factor in first semester retention at community college.

One confirming aspect of the regression on educational goals is that the levels of educational goal increase in difficulty and therefore should be most correlated with goal difficulty. This was, in fact, the case. The significance of the t-value for goal difficulty in the analysis was .02.

Apart from the least squares regression that was employed in a number of the analyses, logistic regression was used with the dichotomous dependent variable "returned in the spring semester." Goal commitment was significant in this analysis.

Another use of a procedure other than regression analysis was the use of chi-square for occupational goals. Chi-square values bearing on the relationship of these occupational goals to "commitment," "difficulty," and importance" were all significant.

Analysis of variance and multiple comparison procedures were performed on educational goal change. For Composition I students, higher commitment scores were obtained for students who raised their standards from the fall semester. This result was not the case for the Skills students.

This study used aspects of goal complexity to determine if these variables significantly predicted goals and overall long term performance of students who had supplied information as part of a freshman Composition I course or a Basic Skills course. While significant predictors were found, especially for Composition I students, the overall explanation produced by R square in some cases, even when the model was significant, was too low. R square=.03 for the educational goal for attending the community college; R square=.0856 for "gpa-goal;" and R square=.0950 for ultimate educational goal.

One limitation of the study was that students may not have had real goals before they were administered a questionnaire, and only came up with the goals at the time they were presented with the task of selecting a goal. In this sense many of the students' goals may have been

unrealistic. Furthermore, students' educational goals may be readily changeable. Follow-ups of the students may result in goals that are more congruent to their actual performance.

While these factors contribute to making goals at a community college a more complex phenomenon, especially for "gpa-goal" and "ultimate educational goal," they barely do so for the educational goal at the community college. It would seem that other factors are needed to help explain the variation in students' educational goals. As was demonstrated with the addition of the variable "credits completed", the R square went up to .3137 for Composition I students. This is a more useful percentage of variation explained.

Finally, the independent variables in the analyses were on different scales: ordinal and nominal. It is conjectured that the impact of the complexity variables would have been greater if the analyses could be combined.

**Conclusion**

Students who have a goal may achieve greater success at community college. Related to this achievement, albeit in a small way, is how committed the students are, how difficult they perceive the goal to be, and how important they find the goal. Therefore, in some cases the goals are complex. However, in the present study, students may not have had preconceived goals, especially the Skills students, who may have thought of the goals for the first time at the time of data collection. Behavior afterwards may have had no relation for many students to the goals they had indicated. For others, it may have planted a goal in their minds for them to pursue. In future research of this kind in higher education, more emphasis needs to be placed on the goal-setting process.

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